



Fidesz' project accountability: running on empty

Fidesz is wrapping up its efforts to uncover instances of verifiable corruption under the previous government. Despite impressive statistics in terms of the number of cases investigated, man-hours put in and funds invested, these efforts have failed to result in as much as a single conviction thus far. Even if a couple materialise later, it isn't too early to declare Fidesz' "accountability" mission an unmitigated failure. Still, in defence of the entire project and its leader, Gyula Budai, it must be said that the deck was stacked against them. No government in Hungary has ever had a serious interest in rooting out corruption; not the other party's, and definitely not its own.

Holding the Socialists accountable for their alleged crimes was one of the central Fidesz campaign promises. Such promises were of course nothing new in Hungarian politics. In fact, MSZP itself had campaigned with a similar slogan in 2002. The perception of corruption has contributed to the defeat of all three governments that lost elections since 1998. Yet just as MSZP's enforcer László Keller failed in his efforts to facilitate the successful prosecution of alleged Fidesz crimes, two successive Fidesz' crusaders, Ferenc Papcsák and Gyula Budai – the latter's name is now largely identified with efforts in this context, which is why we will also refer to him when we discuss the "accountability" efforts – have also come up empty-handed.

An A for effort?

Ostensibly, at least, it was not for lack of trying. There are different statistics out there concerning what the Commissioner for Enforcing Accountability has achieved. In an unusually sincere display of the intertwinement between the governing party and the state, the official governmental website on accountability (<http://elszamoltatas.kormany.hu/>) also boasts a Fidesz banner, but few useful statistics. Despite the Fidesz' webpage promise that the process is entirely transparent and all the necessary data would be published on the abovementioned dedicated portal, there is very little actual information on what Budai has done.

Drawing on several sources, we've compiled the following statistics. 1440 submissions were made to the commissioner, whose staff compiled reports in some 110 cases. 61 criminal reports were submitted. Police and prosecutors are still investigating almost half of these, but thus far only seven cases resulted in the prosecution bringing criminal charges, involving 39 persons. Among the cases still under investigation are also some of the more prominent issues of the past years, such as the Malév privatisation, the respective sales of the Hungarian public television building and the building of the Hungarian commercial representation in Moscow. Though there have been a massive number of investigations and there are still some cases pending, the most damning statistic for Budai's activities is still the number "zero": thus far not a single person has been convicted in Budai's cases. Even if that number were to creep up slightly, the yield of the accountability is likely to be marginal at best. It is highly questionable whether all that was worth maintaining the Commissioner's staff (a team of seven at the time Budai was relieved three months before his appointment was due to expire anyway) for two years. The accountability Commissioner certainly does not look like an advertisement for the responsible spending of public funds.



A reverse Paul

One underappreciated ironic twist in the whole accountability saga is Budai's appointment to succeed József Ágyán as junior minister in the Ministry of Agriculture. Ágyán had resigned after repeatedly and publicly criticising the loan of valuable farmland to speculators close to Fidesz rather than families who wish to make a living from farming.

While one aspect of Ágyán's criticism concerns policy, i.e. the question of whether farmlands should be given to farming families or to businesspersons, and is thus a legitimate subject of disagreement, the other, alleging essentially corrupt practices, concerns government ethics and should be beyond dispute. Here Ágyán's charges are especially serious, for Fidesz has not made an earnest effort to refute them. The appointment of Budai to Ágyán's position is correspondingly – and herein lies the irony – widely perceived as a move to ensure that the loyal apparatchik quietly facilitate and cover the dubious practices excoriated by Ágyán.

Preordained failure

The ease with which Budai transitioned from trying to uncover governmental misdeeds to covering dubious practices partly explains his failure in the former role. The financial transactions under investigation are naturally too intricate and shadowy for anyone to offer an insider's view of what is going on. Based on recent Hungarian history, however, we know enough to venture reasonable hypotheses as to why his enterprise had to and was in fact meant to fail.

First, many of the corruption schemes are constructed in such a way that they adhere to legal regulations. If one has control over the legal framework to shape the distribution of public funds, then it is possible to siphon off money legally, too, presuming sufficient brazenness and/or an apathetic public, inundated by and desensitised towards the ceaseless stream of news about money flowing to circles close to the government. As the fortunes "redistributed" to cronies of the current government attest, Fidesz is all too well aware of this possibility. Furthermore, even when the flow of the money does enter into the realm of illegality, its route is often so convoluted that a team consisting of a few persons that investigate over a 1,000 cases could hardly be expected to delve deep enough to actually disentangle it.

No one is this incompetent

In fact, a frequently heard opinion is that MSZP's János Zuschlag was not charged and convicted under the Socialist government because his money grabbing was unusual, but because he got arrogant and, feeling invulnerable, failed to perform the routine schemes to hide it from investigators. Finally, there is the widespread suspicion that many shady deals are in fact apportioned between the major parties, which would imply that a serious investigation would stir a hornet's nest even in the governing party.

To assume that Budai failed on account of his incompetence may therefore well be an undeserved credit to his motivation. In any case, neither the suggestion that there weren't

any as of yet uncovered instances of corruption under the previous government nor the notion that investigators would not be able to substantiate any despite earnest efforts stands up to reasonable scrutiny.

Mission accomplished

The reactions to Budai's failure were as predictable as the outcome of his mission. Notwithstanding the fact that of the countless persons investigated by Budai not a single one was convicted, Fidesz' János Lázár unsurprisingly hailed the accountability project as a great success. MSZP probably agreed, as the raw numbers allowed its spokesman, Zsolt Török, to emphasise how its own politicians had emerged vindicated from Budai's accusations and to argue that under close scrutiny, the cases Budai had reviewed did not qualify as scandals. MSZP's boasting is probably a bitter pill for Fidesz to swallow, but preferable to more successful investigations that might upset the delicate scheme pertaining to the use of public funds.

Re-emphasising their outsider status, LMP and Jobbik are less understanding. Both proclaimed the project a failure and impugned Fidesz' and Budai's earnestness. LMP's András Schiffer had especially tough words for Budai's efforts, saying that the entire accountability was "mere eyewash from Fidesz. By periodically dangling handcuffs over the Socialists' heads, they keep the adrenaline levels of their own fanatics elevated". Real accountability, however, was not in Fidesz' interest, for then a change of government might result "in Fidesz' oligarchs being held accountable". The political elite is a "democratic cartel united by common crimes that render any promise of accountability made by them ridiculous," Schiffer concluded. Having seen this drama play out again and again, many citizens are probably tempted to agree with Schiffer. Given the solid history of dubious party financing, that will hardly faze the major players.